

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

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Five Videos by  
Nathalie  
Djurberg &  
Hans Berg



# THE PARADE

The animated videos of Nathalie Djurberg are akin to fairy tales where humans and animals, mostly wild, coexist in the same realm without requiring explanation; where a crocodile amicably accompanies a man on a walk or a tiger sleeps in a girl's room by the foot of her bed. Unlike fairy tales, however, there is no moral at the end of the story. Rather, there is an exploration of society's moral boundaries. Moreover, the fairy tales that these videos bring to mind are not the classic Disney remakes. Instead they hearken back to the original accounts of the Brothers Grimm in which imagery more frightening and macabre than their modern-day retellings is detailed in order to instill the message of ethical certitude: as in "Cinderella," whose evil stepsisters chop off the heels and toes of their own feet to try and fit into the coveted glass slipper.

Djurberg uses the vehicle of the fairy tale, as well as the medium of clay and stop-motion animation, evocations of youthfulness and innocence, in order to investigate its opposite, sexuality and violence. A certain threshold is crossed many times over with scenes of dismemberment, decapitation, cross-species copulation, and molestation, oftentimes with a group overpowering an individual. These graphic depictions, however, are mitigated by the Play-Doh blood spurts and the rawness of the puppets' manufacture, which is not without occasional humor (Is that macaroni that is oozing out of the eviscerated walrus?). All this is underlined by Hans Berg's dark, somber melodies which auditorily relay the bleak and sinister activities on the screen and deepen our visceral experience of the images.

Djurberg's art often elicits comparisons to the writer Georges Bataille in its brazen, unapologetic display of transgressive eroticism and brutality. This correlation can be further advanced by examining the similarity in the symbolism found in both of their work. Bataille's *Story of the Eye* (1928) upholds the eye, the egg, the sun, and other round objects as representations of female genitalia and sexuality. Philosopher Roland Barthes, in his essay "The Metaphor of the Eye" (1962), extends the simile to the many forms of liquids described in the narrative, including tears, milk, and urine. Djurberg mines these same elements in the worlds she creates: white eggs, eyes that get poked out, leaking breast milk, and plentiful tears and blood. Furthermore, Bataille relates sex to such matters as terror, crime, and suffocation, calling them "things indefinitely destroying human bliss and honesty." In Djurberg's work we also see the convergence of sexuality and savagery, and innocence ravaged by impurity.

Djurberg has said that she translates the expressions and movements of her puppets by first incarnating these gestures herself, which leads her to empathize with all of them—victims and perpetrators. What's more, the perpetrators seem to sympathize with their victims, as it is frequently the aggressors who cry when meting out punishment or abuse. This communion is passed on to the viewer who then decides whether to pronounce judgment. Yet the artist herself exposes no moral ending. Instead she complicates the idea of morality as a fixed notion and renders it fluid.

In the past few years, Djurberg has begun to introduce another dimension to her artwork. She builds a total environment around her videos, creating immersive installations that implicate the viewer in the transgressions. Her latest such installation from 2011 is *The Parade*, in which a radiantly hued flock of bird sculptures fills up an entire gallery space. Here the birds, who primp and strut (albeit in an eerie way befitting the darkened setting), and their avian conduct are associated with human behavior. They act only as the façade, however, while the videos that surround them reflect the human subconscious, and the dark psychology that lays beneath.

THIEN LAM, VISUAL ARTS CURATORIAL ASSISTANT

# NATHALIE DJURBERG

All images from *The Parade*. Details of bird sculptures, Photo: Cameron Wittig. Stills from *Deceiving Looks* and *I wasn't made to play the son*.



The space of the artists' installation, *The Parade*, is populated by more than eighty birdlike creatures—assembled from wire, foam, glues and silicone, painted fabric, and clay. The modesty of their material composition belies the unnerving effect of the flock, for these are sculptures that stare back with beady eyes that meet one's gaze at every turn. While they bear the outward appearance of birds, their features, upon closer inspection, reveal a process of forced evolution. They exist in a state of becoming something else. Working from images of real species, the artist has abstracted generic types from essential characteristics, intensifying and exaggerating their appearance. Their coloration is flamboyant, even acrid. Skins look scaly and reptilian. Hair and fur sprout where feathers should be. Gaping maws are covered with blood. Carbuncles, boils, and other dysmorphic features disfigure their bodies. At once alluring and corroded, the surfaces of these creatures entice us to look closer, and when we do, these characteristics begin to recede as Djurberg's humble materials come forward. Feathers are made of bits of hand-painted fabric. Talons are nothing more than hardened modeling clay. Painted wooden eyeballs stare vacantly. Raw cotton, faux fur, and hair. Spray paint and silicone. Brush marks and fingerprints everywhere. These are not birds; they are abstract paintings.

...

Not unlike her sculptures, Djurberg's recent films are best understood together as a flock. Presented not as a sequence of episodes, but rather as interwoven scenarios that overlap and inform each other, they resist stable identification and easy interpretations. Here, the artist has begun to experiment more expansively with narration as a spatial phenomenon. As we wander through *The Parade*, we process these films in fragments and fleeting impressions amidst an intimidating sculptural scenario insistent on returning our gaze. No single film holds the key to the others; they each refract in a matrix of echoes and correspondences, fears and desires. Figures, motifs, settings, and scenarios migrate from one narrative to the next. A captive bird in one film is defeathered in another. Postures, actions, and expressions repeat. Masks serve to disguise intent on multiple occasions, and behaviors oscillate between aggression and affection. No single element remains fixed; Djurberg's looping parade of films is insistently, neurotically recursive.

The same may be said for Berg's dark, atmospheric soundtrack, which suffuses the entire installation. With it, he has begun to explore a new relationship between spectator, film, and installation. For the first time on this scale, he has devised his score using surround sound, mapping each audio channel to a specific film. Simultaneously composing for individual narratives and the group, his composition also reflects the complicated social dynamics of the flock. Each film emanates its own unique soundtrack, yet together they form a "schizophrenic" chorus, which Berg brings precariously close to "the brink of chaos." As one moves through the space of the exhibition, the soundtrack of each film bleeds into the next, creating a soundscape designed to envelop the viewer.

EXCERPTS FROM "WILD LIFE," AN ESSAY BY  
ERIC CROSBY IN THE EXHIBITION CATALOGUE  
PUBLISHED BY THE WALKER ART CENTER

# WITH MUSIC BY HANS BERG

NATHALIE DJURBERG AND HANS BERG SPOKE TO ETHAN  
SWAN, EDUCATION ASSOCIATE AT THE NEW MUSEUM,  
NEW YORK, ON APRIL 27, 2012

Nathalie Djurberg: Birds have been the least interesting animal for me, and when I started making [them] in the beginning it was really just about the look of them, and how they presented themselves. But the more I did research and the more I worked with them, the more attention I gave them, the more interesting they became, and the more I looked at their behavior—like crows actually playing in the snow, and not because it would give them a benefit, but just for the fun of it; or building nests that don't seem good to live in at all, but just to create the perfect home to get the nicest looking girl or something. But what you give attention to becomes interesting to you, also. And I think that boredom isn't really about something being boring, it's because you don't give it enough attention. I really started with the idea of making an animal parade, and having the birds being the outer thing, and the films being the inner life, kind of like a person: where the birds are the clothes, and the films are the psyche or something. And then I started making the birds, and I got really scared because I thought that 'Oh no, they're going to look like real ones, and people are going to think I killed and stuffed a hundred birds, and just placed them out.' But then the more I worked, the more they fell apart and they broke, and the skeletons were too weak, and I didn't know what the feathers were going to be like. So it was really a search for materials, and after the search for materials, it was a search for colors. And after the search for colors, it was really what the meaning for doing this was about.

...

Hans Berg: The bird song is a big part of the music, I would say. When I do music, I don't do it really literally—actually there are a few actual bird songs in the music as well... But it's more an interpretation of how I think the birds sound. And these birds are so special they don't look like normal birds, and therefore the part of the music illustrating the birds doesn't sound like normal birds, either.



All images from *The Parade*. Details of bird sculptures, Photo: Cameron Wittig. Stills from *Bad eggs*, *Open window*, and *I am saving this egg for later*.



# THE MAD TEA PARTY

## FIVE VIDEOS BY NATHALIE DJURBERG & HANS BERG

*The Parade* is supplemented by an exhibition of five videos, selected by Nathalie Djurberg and Hans Berg, which show the progression of their work.



### THE MAD TEA PARTY, 2004

*The Mad Tea Party* is an early work that employs speech bubbles to denote direct dialogue from the mouths of the protagonists. It is also one of the only videos not scored by Hans Berg. The lighthearted melody of this animation will be replaced in later works by Berg's somber, moody, electronic tones.



### TIGER LICKING GIRL'S BUTT, 2004

*Tiger Licking Girl's Butt* is a rare video that features no background music but only the sound of the declarative title—the libidinous lapping of the animal, and the girl's cries, first of surprise, then of pleasure. It is unclear whether the repeated intertitle "Why do I have this urge to do these things over and over again?" refers to the thoughts of the tiger, the girl, or the artist herself.



### PUTTING DOWN THE PREY, 2008

In a spin on anthropomorphic fairy tales, where animals take on human character, *Putting down the prey* depicts a woman in an arctic environment literally embodying the form of a walrus by disemboweling it and climbing into its skin. The final scene portrays the creature happily swimming away into the ocean.



### MY BODY IS A HOUSE OF GLASS, 2011

*My Body Is a House of Glass* is one of four videos comprising a larger installation, *A World of Glass*. A variety of horned animals linger, incongruously, in a delicate room made of ice. As is often the case in Nathalie Djurberg and Hans Berg's videos, ambiguity reigns. Are the wild animals menacing the woman in the room with them or are they protecting her?



### THE PARADE OF RITUALS AND STEREOTYPES, 2012

Where animals were once the screen through which human emotion was filtered in Nathalie Djurberg and Hans Berg's videos, masks have taken their place in the recent work *The Parade of Rituals and Stereotypes*. Clownish or taking on vague beastly form, the masks add a fantastical element that allows for a distancing from the transgressive procession unfurling in the video.

**Nathalie Djurberg** was born in Lysekil, Sweden, in 1978. She studied art at Folkuniversitetet (1994–95) and Hovedskous Art School (1995–97), both in Gothenburg before receiving her MFA from Malmö Art Academy in 2002. She has honed a distinctive style of stop-motion animation since 1999, when she first taught herself how to make films. Using the pliability of clay, her handcrafted narratives explore the vicissitudes of revenge, lust, submission, gluttony, and other primal emotions, in wry allegories of human behavior and social taboo. Increasingly, her practice has blurred the cinematic and the sculptural in immersive environments that integrate moving images and sound with related set pieces. She currently lives and works with Hans Berg in Rättvik, Sweden.

Born in Rättvik, Sweden, in 1978, **Hans Berg** works as a techno and house music producer. He is a self-taught musician who began playing the drums in punk and rock bands at the age of fourteen. A year later, he started creating electronic music—which he has made ever since—when he purchased his first synthesizer and sampler. In addition to his many live concerts, Berg also has an extensive discography with releases by Kant Recordings, Tsunami Productions, and other labels. He met Djurberg in Berlin in 2004, and since then he has composed the music for all of her films and installations.

The artists' collaborations have been featured widely in solo and group exhibitions around the world. Most notably, in 2009, they presented their installation *The Experiment in Making Worlds* at the 53rd Venice Biennale, for which Djurberg was awarded the prestigious Silver Lion for a Promising Young Artist. They have had other solo exhibitions at Röda Sten Art Centre, Gothenburg (2012); Camden Arts Centre, London (2011); Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam (2011); Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio (2011); Naturhistorisches Museum Basel (2010); kestnergesellschaft, Hannover (2010); Frye Art Museum, Seattle (2009); Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Culture Center, Los Angeles (2008); Fondazione Prada, Milan (2008); Kunsthalle Winterthur, Switzerland (2007); and Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna (2007).



Installation view, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Photo: Gene Pittman





*The Parade (detail), Photo: Cameron Wittig*



*Still from Bad eggs*


YBCA's presentation of *The Parade: Nathalie Djurberg with Music by Hans Berg* is supported, in part, by the Barbro Osher Pro Suecia Foundation.

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*The Parade: Nathalie Djurberg with Music by Hans Berg* is organized by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis and curated by Eric Crosby, assistant curator of visual arts and Dean Otto, associate curator of film/video (September 8–December 31, 2011). It traveled to the New Museum, New York (May 2–September 2, 2012) before its run at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.

Images for *The Parade: Nathalie Djurberg with Music by Hans Berg*: Prada Collection, Milan Courtesy the artists; Zach Feuer Gallery, New York; and Giò Marconi, Milan.

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### About Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

Founded in 1993 out of an expressed need for an accessible, high profile arts center devoted to contemporary art of all genres, YBCA presents contemporary art from the Bay Area and around the world that reflects the profound issues and ideas of our time, expands the boundaries of artistic practice, and celebrates the diversity of human experience and expression. YBCA is an integrated site for creative endeavor; a unique fusion of art, innovation, and ideas in a social environment. It serves as a curated platform for the dynamic convergence of artists, inventors, thinkers, producers, and the community, working together to sustain multiple levels of participation, propel short- and long-term social change, and ensure contemporary arts and living artists are vital to our society. YBCA's artistic offerings include a year-round exhibition program, two annual performance series, a celebrated year-round art film program, a community rentals program making YBCA performance spaces available to Bay Area performing arts organizations at affordable rates, and award-winning community engagement programming. Distinguished by its widespread support of local, national, and international artists in the performing, visual, and media arts, YBCA is also recognized for its innovative approach to audience-centered programs and for its partnerships with other arts and community organizations. YBCA selects Big Ideas around which to organize its wide-ranging programs. The current Big Ideas include: ENCOUNTER: Engaging the social context, SOAR: The search for meaning, REFLECT: Considering the personal, and DARE: Innovations in art, action, audience. These ideas, which encompass art from all disciplines, are designed to focus an investigation of contemporary art and its relationship to the larger world. Using the Big Ideas as the portals, YBCA has established a framework of thought that invites exploration and risk-taking, quiet reflection, and active engagement.

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